LUONTO KOTI PROJECT BY MONIHELI AND MARTTALIITTO IN FINLAND

The Luontokoti project represents a collaborative endeavor between *Moniheli*, a Finnish multicultural nongovernmental organization supporting over one-hundred-member organizations in Finland focused on immigrant integration, and the *Marttaliitto (Martha Association)*, a long-standing Finnish non-profit organization with expertise in environmental education, community engagement, and civic participation. Launched as a three-year nationwide initiative (2022-2024), Luontokoti Project utilizes a nature-based approach to address the well-being challenges experienced by immigrants in Finland. Through a multifaceted program incorporating nature walks, home gardening, various basic outdoor activities and training for multicultural organizations, the project aims to improve the mental, physical, and social well-being of immigrant populations while simultaneously strengthening integration support models and promoting multiculturalism.

Action Objective and Results

The Luontokoti project offers a range of open-access programs, courses, trainings, excursions, and events designed to improve the mental and physical well-being of immigrants and other community members in Finland. These programs leverage Finland's natural environment, utilizing nature-based activities and cultural immersion to foster positive experiences and enhance social integration. The initiative is intentionally inclusive, welcoming participation from diverse populations regardless of immigration/refugee status or language skills, thereby promoting integration, multiculturalism and community building.

Brief Description and Scope

Finland's rich natural environment, coupled with the nation's unique "everyman's right" – which grants public access to natural areas – provides a unique context for addressing the challenges of immigrant integration. While immigrants and refugees often face significant barriers to integration, including language difficulties, cultural differences, and social isolation, leading to the formation of isolated migrant enclaves, Finland’s outdoor recreation culture offers a potential pathway to social inclusion. The Luontokoti project capitalizes on this, designing its program around nature-based activities such as walking, cycling, skiing, berry picking, swimming, hiking, and camping, to promote cross-cultural interaction, enhance mental and physical well-being, and facilitate a greater sense of belonging among immigrants within Finnish society. This strategy directly addresses the limitations imposed by language barriers and promotes social engagement in a natural and accessible setting.

Tools and Practices

The Luontokoti program leverages typical Finnish outdoor recreational activities—berry picking, swimming, hiking, and camping to facilitate immigrant integration and enhance physical and mental well-being. The accessibility of these activities, requiring minimal prior skills or specialized training, promotes broad participation among immigrants and refugees. Furthermore, shared engagement in these activities provides opportunities for informal language learning and intercultural exchange. Conversations about nature, food, and recreational pursuits in Finnish foster linguistic competence and facilitate a deeper understanding of Finnish culture and social norms. This process is reciprocal; interaction with immigrants during Luontokoti programs enhances the understanding of immigrant

cultures and fosters the development of positive interethnic relationships. The resultant social interaction and development of new social networks contribute significantly to mitigating feelings of isolation, depression, and loneliness among participants.

Resources

The Luontokoti program demonstrates a model of efficient resource mobilization, relying primarily on readily available assets and collaborative partnerships. Key resources include:

- **Organizational Infrastructure:** A coordinating organizational platform is essential for managing human resources and program logistics. This platform may be an existing non-governmental organization, immigrant centered organizations or a newly established collaborative network of community groups.
- **Volunteer Recruitment:** Volunteer recruitment is a cornerstone of the program's success. Volunteers are sourced through partnerships with various community organizations, including non-governmental organizations serving immigrant populations, refugee reception centers, educational institutions (schools, universities), local government agencies, faith-based organizations, sports and recreation clubs, and businesses related to outdoor recreation and well-being.
- **Expert Knowledge:** Access to expert knowledge is facilitated through partnerships with outdoor clubs, sports organizations, educational institutions, and businesses specializing in outdoor recreation or well-being. These partnerships provide access to trained professionals and specialized equipment at reduced or no cost.
- **Community-Based Dissemination** The program leverages a cost-effective communication strategy, primarily through social media channels managed by the coordinating organization. This provides a platform for volunteer dissemination of program information and recruitment of additional volunteers and resources.

Plan and Timetable

Program activities are scheduled to maximize participant engagement while adapting to the constraints imposed by Finland's seasonal climate. A core component of the program involves bi-weekly weekend excursions and hiking trips during the summer months (May 15th – August 30th). In addition, monthly training workshops are conducted year-round. The scheduling of outdoor activities outside of the peak summer season demonstrates flexibility, adapting to prevailing weather conditions to ensure participant safety and enjoyment.

Methodology

The Luontokoti program employs a mixed-methods approach to facilitate immigrant integration through nature-based activities. Its implementation strategy comprises the following key phases

1. Program Infrastructure and Resource Mobilization:

The program can operate either as a standalone entity such as hobby club activity platform or be integrated into the framework of an existing organization. The selection of a suitable venue is crucial, with considerations including accessibility for target populations (immigrants and refugees), proximity to natural areas, and the availability of appropriate facilities (e.g., indoor space for workshops). Decide on a suitable location for your training activities If you choose to organize a

separate platform. The existing premises of your organization location can be used if you choose to go under an existing organization or identify a suitable location such as a community center, school, library or church hall.

2. Volunteer Recruitment and Training:

The success of the program hinges on the recruitment and training of volunteers proficient in the local language. Volunteers are drawn from diverse backgrounds, including language enthusiasts, educators, and community members committed to intercultural exchange. Volunteer training focuses on facilitating nature-based activities, fostering multicultural environments, and promoting cultural sensitivity.

3. Program Design and Activity Scheduling:

A structured schedule of activities is developed, taking into account the availability of both volunteers and participants. Regular sessions, either weekly or bi-weekly, are deemed optimal, with scheduling mindful of participants' availability and logistical constraints.

4. Dissemination and Participant Recruitment:

A multi-channel outreach strategy is implemented to maximize participation. This includes leveraging community centers, refugee reception centers, refugee support organizations, schools, religious institutions, and social media platforms. Dissemination of program information occurs via flyers, posters, and online announcements, ensuring clear communication about program goals, activities, and schedules.

5. Activity Implementation and Facilitation:

Program activities are carefully designed to engage participants of varying proficiency levels, utilizing interactive and participatory methods. Activities encompass a variety of nature-based experiences, including guided nature walks, workshops, outdoor activities and participatory learning sessions that foster intercultural exchange and environmental awareness. Learning materials are curated to support the activities, ensuring accessibility and relevance to the target audience.

6. Program Monitoring and Evaluation:

A robust evaluation framework is implemented to ensure Luontokoti program effectiveness. This framework includes:

- **Qualitative data collection:** Participant feedback is actively solicited through regular surveys and semi-structured interviews to assess satisfaction, identify areas for improvement, and measure perceived program impact.
- **Quantitative data collection:** Attendance rates, participation levels, and pre and post program measures of well-being and knowledge acquisition are monitored and analyzed to gauge the program's overall effectiveness.

7. Program Sustainability:

Long-term sustainability requires securing ongoing funding, maintaining active volunteer recruitment, and fostering strong partnerships with local organizations and stakeholders invested in immigrant integration and community development. Continuous refinement of program activities based on feedback and evaluation data is essential to maintain program relevance and efficacy.

Budget

The successful implementation of the Luontokoti project necessitates a comprehensive budgetary framework encompassing various cost categories. A detailed breakdown of anticipated expenditures is crucial for ensuring the project's financial viability and effective resource allocation. The following outlines key budgetary considerations:

1. Venue and Facility Costs:

While many Luontokoti activities leverage the readily available natural resources of Finland's extensive parkland and forested areas, minimizing venue rental expenses, certain program components necessitate dedicated spaces. Workshops, indoor training sessions, and potentially inclement weather contingency plans may require the reservation of community centers or other suitable indoor facilities. Therefore, a budget line item should be allocated to cover potential venue rental fees, contingent upon the specific activities and their logistical requirements.

2. Material and Equipment Acquisition:

Acquisition of materials and equipment is essential for facilitating engaging and effective nature-based activities. This category includes:

- **Educational Resources:** The procurement of educational materials, including brochures, maps, field guides (with a focus on Finnish flora and fauna), and printed handouts for workshops. Costs should account for printing, design, and potential translation into multiple languages.
- **Activity-Specific Equipment:** Depending on the planned activities (e.g., foraging, berry picking, nature photography, birdwatching), the budget must account for the acquisition or rental of specialized equipment. This might include tools, containers, cameras, binoculars, and any other necessary materials.
- **Safety Provisions:** The provision of a comprehensive first-aid kit, adequately stocked for various potential outdoor scenarios, is paramount for ensuring participant safety.

3. Participant Sustenance and Refreshments:

To enhance participant experience and foster a positive learning environment, the provision of refreshments during excursions and workshops is recommended. This necessitates budgetary allocation for snacks, beverages, and potentially meals, especially in the context of longer workshops or training sessions. Dietary restrictions and allergies must be considered to ensure inclusivity.

4. Marketing and Outreach Expenditures:

Effective marketing and outreach strategies are critical for attracting participants. This category encompasses:

- **Printed Media:** The design, printing, and distribution of flyers, posters, or brochures through various channels, including community centers, libraries, and relevant organizations.
- **Digital Marketing:** Investment in social media advertising campaigns and potentially website development or maintenance to enhance online visibility and facilitate registration.
- **Translation Services:** Depending on the target participant population, translation services for marketing materials may be required to ensure effective communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

5. Personnel and Expertise:

While volunteer contributions are a vital component of the Luontokoti project, budgetary allocation for expert services may be required for certain activities. This includes:

- **Expert Fees:** Compensation for nature guides, botanists, or other specialists who contribute specialized expertise to specific workshops or training sessions. This may also include fees for instructors conducting well-being or integration workshops.
- **Volunteer Training and Incentives:** The project must allocate resources for volunteer training programs, focusing on essential skills (first aid, nature awareness, intercultural sensitivity). Small incentives to recognize and reward volunteer contributions may enhance motivation and retention.

6. Transportation and Logistics:

Transportation costs should be considered, particularly for field excursions. This encompasses potential reimbursements for volunteer travel expenses or arranging and funding transport for participants who lack access to private vehicles.

7. Administrative and Operational Costs:

A proper budget line item must be dedicated to standard administrative and operational expenses:

- **Office Supplies:** Stationery, printing, and other routine office supplies.
- **Insurance:** Liability insurance is essential for mitigating risks associated with outdoor activities.
- **Communication:** Telephone, internet, and other communication expenses.

Success criteria

Assessing the effectiveness of the Luontokoti project in promoting integration through nature-based activities requires a multifaceted approach. The following criteria will be used to evaluate the project's success:

- **Pre- and Post-Program Assessments:** Measure participants' well-being (mental, physical, and social), knowledge of Finnish nature, and sense of community belonging will be conducted prior to program participation. Following program completion, a post-program assessment will be administered using identical instruments to measure changes in these key variables. These assessments will employ standardized questionnaires, structured interviews, and validated self-report measures to ensure reliability and comparability.
- **Program Participation and Engagement:** Quantitative data on program attendance and active participation rates will be collected and analyzed to determine the level of engagement among participants. Higher participation rates will be interpreted as indicative of positive program appeal and effectiveness. Qualitative observations during program activities will supplement these quantitative metrics, providing richer insights into participant engagement levels.
- **Observational Assessments:** Observe participant behavior and interactions during activities to assess their engagement, enjoyment, and learning experiences. Note any improvements in social interaction, confidence, and comfort in natural settings.
- **Feedback Surveys:** Administer regular surveys to gather participant feedback on their experiences, perceived benefits of participation, suggestions for improvement, and satisfaction with Luontokoti activities. Collected data will be used to assess participant engagement, enjoyment, and learning experiences. Specific indicators will include observable improvements in social interaction, confidence levels, and comfort levels within natural settings.
- **Qualitative Data Collection:** Conduct in-depth interviews with participants to gain deeper insights into individual participant experiences. These interviews will explore motivations for participation, challenges encountered, and perceived impacts of the Luontokoti program on well-being and integration. Qualitative data analysis techniques will be employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the collected data.
- **Measures of Well-being Outcomes:** Utilize validated questionnaires or scales to assess changes in participants' mental and physical well-being, stress levels, and overall quality of life before and after participating in Luontokoti programs.

- **Assessment of Knowledge Acquisition and Environmental Awareness:** Assess participants' knowledge of local nature, flora, fauna, and sustainable practices before and after participation using test, quizzes or other knowledge assessment methods.
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct follow-up studies to track participants' well-being, knowledge retention, and integration outcomes over an extended period after their involvement in Luontokoti activities.
- **Evaluation of Social Integration:** Evaluate changes in participants' social networks, connections with the local community, and sense of belonging. This could involve social network analysis or self-reported measures of social connectedness.
- **Comparative Analysis:** A comparative analysis will be undertaken to assess the differential impacts of the Luontokoti program. This will involve comparing outcomes among participants who actively engaged in the program and a suitable control group who did not participate. This comparison will serve to illuminate the program's unique contribution to enhanced well-being and integration.
- **Community Impact Assessment:** Assess the broader impact of the Luontokoti project on the community, including changes in attitudes toward immigrants, increased social cohesion, and enhanced cross-cultural understanding. Gather feedback from community stakeholders and partners to gauge the overall impact.

Adaptation

Finland's rich natural environment offers a unique setting for addressing the challenges of immigrant integration, making the implementation of the Luontokoti project particularly effective. Yet, in other countries, the project's aims might face obstacles due to limited natural spaces. To mitigate this, activities can be organized in urban parks, community gardens, or recreational facilities, such as tree plantation, short city park walking excursions which can serve as alternative venues for fostering community engagement. Additionally, indoor activities such as cooking classes, art workshops, music instrument classes, or cultural exchange events can be conducted to facilitate interaction among participants.

Should the host country have significant constraints on providing natural environments, alternative strategies can effectively adapt the Luontokoti project. Accessibility is crucial in ensuring successful outcomes because these activities, which require minimal prior skills or specialized training, encourage widespread participation among immigrants and refugees.
The project should offer a variety of open-access programs that directly address language barriers and promote social engagement in accessible community settings. Content should foster interactions that enhance understanding of immigrant cultures and facilitate the development of positive interethnic relationships. Furthermore, the Luontokoti program can be tailored to diverse contexts and environments. By employing similar tools and methodologies, it can welcome participation from varied populations, regardless of immigration or refugee status or language proficiency, thereby promoting integration, multiculturalism, and community building.

In summary, while Finland's natural spaces enhance the Luontokoti experience, creative adaptations of the program can still cultivate meaningful interactions and support for immigrant populations in urban environments, effectively contributing to their integration and well-being.

Photos

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References

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